

Meeting of minds: Imagining the future of child and youth mental health research from an early career perspective

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Abstract

Child and youth mental health is an international public health and research priority. We are an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral network of UK-based early career researchers (ECRs) with an interest in child and youth mental health research. In this paper, we reflect on ongoing challenges and areas for growth, offering recommendations for key stakeholders in our field including researchers, institutions, and funders. We present a vision from an ECR perspective of what child and youth mental health research could look like moving forward and we explore how the research infrastructure can support ECRs and the wider research field in making this vision a reality. We focus specifically on a) embracing complexity; b) centering diverse voices; and c) facilitating sustainable research environments and funding systems. We present recommendations for all key partners to consider alongside their local contexts and communities to actively and collaboratively drive progress and transformative change.

Introduction

With child and youth mental health positioned as an international public health priority, the last two decades has seen considerable progress in research funding and activity. However, there are ongoing challenges across the field, and it is important to reflect and collectively explore these alongside opportunities for development. In this paper we, an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral network of UK-based Early Career Researchers (ECRs) working in and around child and youth mental health research, reflect on challenges and areas for growth, and offer recommendations for key stakeholders. We hope that in sharing aspirations for development, we can celebrate good practice and prompt critical reflection where there is room for growth. Specifically, we reflect on embracing complexity, centering diverse voices, and facilitating sustainable research environments and funding systems. In bringing an ECR perspective, we offer ‘fresh eyes’ with openness to new ways of working and celebrate the role of ECRs as future leaders.

This paper arose from discussions at an event in May 2022, in the Emerging Minds GROW Researcher Development programme. Emerging Minds is a network that “aims to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems experienced by children and young people”,¹ funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The GROW programme developed a network of researchers working in child and youth mental health, to support their development as future field leaders. As members of this network, we work across disciplines including psychology, neuroscience, psychiatry, social care, sociology, technology and digital studies, education, and occupational therapy, and across sectors including academia, healthcare, and third sector organisations. Our views are shaped by the partners we connect with through our work – from children and young people and their carers to funders and commissioners. Here, we conceptualise child and youth developmental stages in their broadest sense from the early years to young adulthood (i.e., from birth to 24 years²). In shaping this piece, we engaged in a digital resonance checking exercise with eight UK-based young people aged 16 to 25 years with diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, education, and previous research involvement, approached through participation networks or authors’ projects. The refined ideas resulting from this exercise were then further developed through a workshop with Emerging Minds Summit attendees in 2022, which included practitioners, funders, commissioners, academics and young people with

an interest in children and young people's mental health.³ This process allowed us to be confident in the wider relevance and resonance of our ideas, while keeping the ECR perspective front-and-centre.

Embracing complexity

The need to “embrace complexity” in mental health research has been increasingly highlighted.^{4,5} Conventionally, mental health research can be siloed by disciplinary and methodological boundaries. Complex systems approaches move away from reductionist ways of working focussing on singular components/settings, and take a systemic perspective to understanding issues affecting mental health.^{4,6} Embracing complexity includes conceptualising mental health and the factors affecting mental health as part of a complex, interwoven system that changes over time.⁴ Given recent opportunities to embrace interdisciplinary doctoral training (e.g., UKRI Doctoral Training Partnerships⁷) some of us have benefited from, we propose that as a collective we bring a unique perspective to embracing complexity, which is essential for the future of the field. There is no better time to embrace complexity than now, we argue, and we highlight two avenues toward this.

Foster interdisciplinary working

Embracing complexity contains working together with different subject matter across disciplines. As ECRs we see an increasing drive toward interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary ways of working. We think interdisciplinarity ought to be embraced in its widest sense, which includes collaborating with different scientific fields (e.g., physics, sociology, mathematics, biology) as well as with clinicians, lived experience experts, and policy and practice experts. Interdisciplinary working will, in our view, need to become the norm to address the current issues.

It is our experience that this does not simply happen spontaneously, and requires time, funding and ongoing attention to interdisciplinary input in research and practice. Moreover, at times, a deliberate decision towards creating a level playing field for approaches, disciplines, and theoretical frameworks may be needed. Funders play an important role in encouraging interdisciplinary and translational research. We have been encouraged by recent funding calls where interdisciplinarity is crucial (e.g., MQ Transdisciplinary Grants⁸). Indeed, some funding calls simply cannot be delivered with singular discipline, such as the recent Wellcome Mental Health Data Prize⁹, where data science, mental health science and lived experience perspectives were required to deliver translational tools to improve mental health.

From an educational perspective, some of us have benefited from, for instance, the Doctoral Training Partnerships or Wellcome PhD programmes. Both provide highly interdisciplinary curricula and supervisory structures, allowing future researchers to learn to conduct research in an interdisciplinary setting from the start. It will be beneficial to encourage, and make possible, interdisciplinary training opportunities worldwide.

Interdisciplinarity can occur at funder and training levels, however, there are also opportunities to foster interdisciplinary working at institutional and journal levels. Institutionally, structures and spaces for inter-faculty collaboration, clinician-research collaboration, and lived experience involvement can be established. This may include small seed funding for bid development, or

cross-faculty events. Journals can develop special issues where interdisciplinarity is encouraged and work across diagnostic boundaries.

Translation from the start

Embracing complexity extends to efforts that consider how research is implemented in practice. Resources for the delivery of services, research and implementation are scarce. To develop maximum impact, even for basic research, we argue that we need to consider how our research can impact and influence practice from the start. For instance, evidence-based digital mental health interventions often do not transition from research to practice and face significant challenges when implemented including technical difficulties, low awareness of data standards and privacy, and low engagement and retention rates. As ECRs, we suggest that drawing upon implementation science and realist evaluations, whilst co-designing provisions with the intended target audience and setting, would contribute to the adoption of effective interventions in our reality of complex contexts and needs.

Centering diverse voices

Mental health research is often conducted on a limited sample despite evidence suggesting that various social characteristics (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity) can affect both prevalence and presentation of experiences.¹⁰ We suggest that problems of representativeness and the sharing of power within research are central to our understanding of children and young people's mental health, and we outline key issues and potential avenues towards resolution.

Co-production / stakeholder involvement

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹¹ children and young people have the right to be involved in decisions about them and their lives. This has been translated and developed through child and youth participation practices and models.¹² Guidelines, such as those from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR),¹³ state that research should be *with* or *by* the population of interest, rather than *to* or *about*. It is our responsibility to ensure that children and young people (alongside parents/carers) are involved meaningfully, and to facilitate research that is transparent, relevant, and responsible. This is often broadly referred to as patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) or, where individuals are more fully embedded in design and process, as co-production. This can enhance understandings of children and young people's experiences and, in turn, enhances development and evaluation of practices and interventions. Despite these potential benefits and growing expectations of such practices from some funders, the conditions for this work do not always support best practice.¹⁴

There are multiple practical barriers to working with peer researchers. These can include confusion at ethical system levels as to how co-production differs from research; that peer researchers are not participants but people with lived experience who offer expertise to help create more effective, meaningful research. A further challenge is institutions not having structures to remunerate peer researchers in timely ways without affecting benefits or unemployment status, often with long delays in payment systems that can damage trust. As we grapple with these systemic challenges, ECRs who have been integrating co-production into their work from the beginning of their careers are especially well-placed to develop innovative processes to facilitate smoother processes, but often lack the authority to alter existing processes.

Genuine and effective co-production throughout a project necessitates investing in strong relationships with peer researchers. We see this as central to what a researcher does, not an ad hoc task on specific projects. ECRs often do not have access to co-production funds, rendering it difficult to properly build and maintain these relationships over time and to integrate them into the entire research process. Funding, including within PhD programmes and via strategic ECR schemes, should facilitate co-production work during the conceptualisation and design of projects, not only creating capacity for co-production afterwards. Good examples of such support exist, such as via the NIHR Research Support Service,¹⁵ but such services are often light touch in funds and sometimes focused on specific applications/funders.

Marginalized groups

In highlighting diverse voices, focusing on inclusion and engagement of marginalized communities is central. In our resonance checking, the young people we consulted felt that improving the diversity of research participants and researchers was one of the most important areas for development. Yet, they recognised the far-reaching systemic barriers to including marginalized voices in research. The mental health of members of marginalized communities is significantly poorer than amongst other groups.^{16,17} Our experience as ECRs highlights the lack of diversity of researchers and participants in child and youth mental health research, substantially limiting research knowledge about critical issues. This is related to practical, ethical, and organisational issues.¹⁸ To develop a more accurate understanding of children and young people's mental health, it is vital that we make research more accessible and facilitate a wider range of participants to engage. Putting marginalized voices at the centre of practice should be a priority, instead of allowing those voices to remain unheard through lack of accessibility or action.

This is not only of importance in asking who we engage with as participants, but also who we are as a research community. As ECRs, we all have our own lived experience of the struggle to maintain a career within research. There is a clear leaky pipeline in mental health research, wherein talented young women and ethnic minority researchers are more likely to drop out early and many leave mental health research due to lack of funding.^{19,20} Less research is available around disability, gender, and sexual orientation, however based on our experiences, research is often not an accessible place for disabled people or those from minoritized genders and sexual orientations. In fact, temporary and insecure work in academic research disproportionately affects ECRs, women, and ethnic minorities.²¹ This is in line with our experiences at the time of writing, with many of us on precarious contracts, often short and fixed-term. A healthy research culture can contribute to better quality research and stimulate innovation. Investing in researchers from early in their careers makes them better at what they do and improves retention, particularly improving outcomes for those most likely to be excluded. This necessitates that institutions and funding bodies account for the marginalization that an applicant has experienced and use the methods at their disposal to ensure representation from across minoritized groups moving forward. One example of this is the American Psychological Association's editorial fellowship program, which offers early-career psychologists from historically underrepresented groups structured opportunities for capacity building in academic publishing.

Facilitating sustainable research environments for ECRs

It is important to position this piece within the broader research context. It is telling that the majority of those involved in this piece were not aware of the 2019 UK Researcher Development Concordat,²² which represents a commitment that all UK institutions and funders make under the three key principles of environment and culture, employment, and professional and career development. Despite the Concordat's obligations, we experience many ongoing challenges as ECRs, as reflected throughout this piece. Whilst there is a need for broader conversations, we would like to reflect here on our own experiences and how institutions, funders, and senior managers can go above and beyond the Concordat to ensure ECRs' continued contributions to the future of child and youth mental health research.

Structural challenges

Our shared experiences highlight the difficulties overcoming structural barriers including juggling heavy teaching and administrative workloads and working in fixed-term postdoctoral roles with little time for launching our own research. These roles often do not include protected time or costs for our own research interests, which end up squeezed into weekends and holidays. ECR contributions to the advancement of our field often rely unduly on our unpaid labour. Excessive workloads and unpaid overtime are associated with burnout and drop-out from the higher education sector.^{23,24} Disadvantaged groups, including parents/carers, working class, disabled, and otherwise minoritised applicants face barriers to unpaid work, impacting their career progression.²⁴⁻²⁶ Female academics in the mental health sector are underpaid, under-cited, and under-represented at senior levels, contributing to the leaky pipeline issue.¹⁹ Perpetuating inequalities results in a loss of community diversity and expertise.

There are some ECR opportunities, but they often do not go far enough. Fellowship schemes and funding that are open to ECRs to lead or co-lead exist but are often short-term and do not guarantee job stability. The highly competitive nature of these schemes, coupled with a limited number of funded positions, leaves many ECRs disappointed and at risk of leaving the sector. Definitions of ECR also vary, with some schemes allowing for post-PhD parental leave or part-time working and others taking a purely chronological approach to calculating eligibility. ECRs may also require more time for proposal development compared to senior researchers with established networks and collaborations. We appreciate initiatives that seemingly exceed the Concordat, such as repeated calls (e.g., NIHR's bi-annual fellowship schemes²⁷ and Wellcome's 'bus timetable')²⁸ of upcoming themed funding calls, that aim to level the playing field.

The labour required for ECR grant and fellowship applications should not be underestimated. Building collaborations, conducting PPIE work, and developing budgets can represent months of work, or even longer for ECRs relying on evening- and weekend-working. Researchers can then be kept waiting for a response and can be unable to resubmit rejected application to other schemes (e.g., UKRI policy), even when feedback denotes high quality. This can result in months and even years of time invested, often during precarious or heavy-workload employment, to plan work that cannot proceed. The knock-on effects can have substantive effects on progression and wellbeing.

Learning lessons from the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed funders responding quickly, allowing institutions and researchers to contribute to policy development, and ECRs adapting to unexpected

challenges. Moving forwards, ECRs are well-equipped for complexity with a focus on collaboration, responsiveness, flexibility, and interdisciplinarity. However, many of us experienced first-hand or through our colleagues the precarity of our positions, with unrenewed contracts and redundancies. Going beyond the Concordat, maintaining positive relationships with ECRs forced to move between roles and institutions is crucial for continuity. There is often a trend for senior academics to spend less time “on the ground” or with participants. ECRs have an important role to play in ensuring implementation of the research or interventions developed and thus the introduction of effective child and youth mental health research into practice, but only if they are acknowledged and not lost at the end of their fixed term contract.

A global ECR workforce

ECRs are operating in an increasingly global research context, benefiting from increased opportunities for international collaboration due, for instance, to greater use of online meetings. Despite the expansion of child and youth mental health research, researchers, including ECRs, in high-income countries like the UK must acknowledge their privileged perspective. There is a chance to learn and share globally, challenging biases by building capacity with international counterparts. Many challenges in child and youth mental health research are global, requiring ambitious, collaborative efforts to address issues such as siloed health systems, insufficient focus on prevention, and structural inequalities.^{29–31} We need ambitious joined-up thinking that cuts across hierarchies, structures, and contexts. The global workforce of ECRs is a valuable resource that, with proper support, can contribute significantly to addressing these challenges.

Conclusion

We have explored key themes aligned with the challenges and opportunities within child and youth mental health research with a view to continual development of an infrastructure and ecosystem that facilitates complexity, inclusiveness, and sustainability: namely: a) embracing complexity, including a move beyond reductionist approaches to understanding mental health, interdisciplinary collaboration, attending to complex systems, and producing research that can contribute to policy and provision; b) centering diverse voices, including co-production in our research, engaging research that can productively resonate for supporting marginalized groups, and ensuring that our own research community includes and supports researchers from diverse backgrounds; and c) facilitating sustainable research environments and fundings systems, including ensuring sustained funding approaches to exploring long-term study outcomes, creating a more level playing field, and supporting mentorship and community. We have discussed these areas separately but highlight these as interconnected areas of infrastructure and practices, and thus interconnected challenges *and* interconnected opportunities. For instance, collaborative working across disciplines and sectors can facilitate the centering of diverse voices in a range of ways, and support community and the sharing of opportunities and systemic practices. It is clear that there are many intersecting influences contributing to the current environment in child and youth mental health research. Funding decisions, for instance, are influenced not only by funders but also by policy agendas, academic panels, reviewer input, and senior researchers who have the capacity to advocate for priorities including ECR inclusion. To comprehensively understand how these systems function and interact, and their potential for mobilisation toward progress, a rigorous mapping exercise including representation across all stakeholders, from ECRs to funders, is required. This could be used to inform, for instance, a

detailed theory of change elucidating pathways – both bottom-up and top-down – toward advancing the field.

Such priorities, and the strengths and challenges in these areas, require careful and systematic attention from audiences including funders, institutions, field leaders, research managers, and researchers themselves. In Box 1, we set out key recommendations stemming from discussions throughout this piece and invite key partners to consider these recommendations alongside active exploration of needs within their local contexts and communities to actively and collaboratively drive transformative progress. We hope to emphasise the imperative need to grant ECRs a prominent place in the discourse surrounding child and youth mental health research. ECRs must be provided the space, support, and resources essential for nurturing their potential as future field leaders. Encouragingly, we have witnessed promising developments, exemplified by initiatives like the UKRI-funded networks, such as Emerging Minds, which have demonstrated the value of ECR-inclusive collaboration, and encouraged cross-sector and multidisciplinary working. To move this agenda forward, structured approaches to promote the development and voice of ECRs in the child and youth mental health field must continue to be actively explored.

Box 1

Recommendations for strengthening the child and youth mental health research field from an ECR perspective

Recommendations for embracing complexity

- Academic community to consider complexity science in its approach to studying, funding and encouraging mental health research.
- Funders and institutions to focus on building spaces, opportunities, and structures that allow researchers, and especially ECRs, to conduct interdisciplinary research.
- Funders to further prioritise implementation science and co-design to address barriers that hamper the implementation of effective interventions.
- ECR funding schemes or grants to allow funded time to disseminate findings to participant communities and to write-up scientific publications.

Recommendations for centring diverse voices

- Institutions to streamline their processes around ethical approval of co-produced research and patient and public involvement engagement activities.
- Institutional resources to fund PPIE or child and youth advisory groups open to all researchers (in particular postgraduate students and ECRs without their own funding). Examples of good practice include YPAGs under the GenerationR umbrella³²
- Institutions to check that remuneration for peer researchers fits the needs of researchers and the children and young people better (e.g., quicker payments, longer term funding to sustain PPIE/co production through to dissemination stages).
- Researchers to consider the accessibility of their research practices for participants and peer researchers from marginalized groups.

Recommendations for facilitating sustainable research environments for ECRs

- Senior researchers should recognise their ECRs as potential future leaders and maintain

relationships throughout and beyond grants/fixed terms by acknowledging their contributions e.g., including them on outputs. Following through on their commitment to provide 10 days of CPD is also essential.

- Institutions need to actively fight inequalities by reducing their reliance on excessive workloads and unpaid overtime. Offering more financial stability to ECRs and ensuring protected research time can encourage them to thrive.
- Journals should ensure that ECRs are represented on their advisory boards and should encourage submissions to include an ECR co-author where possible.
- Funders can support ECRs by giving advance notice of future calls as standard; offering more postdoctoral and ‘bridging’ fellowships; running schemes that allow part-time and flexible working; offering more schemes for those who have needed to take a break from working; incentivising applications from a wider range of institutions; providing additional support to ECRs from less research-intensive institutions; and creating more grant programmes that allow joint lead applicants between an ECR and an established PI. Funders would also benefit from appointing an ECR champion.
- Funders, institutions, research managers, and individual researchers should look beyond their contexts and support more ECR communities that facilitate connectedness, regionally and globally, within child and youth mental health e.g., through creating peer networks and establishing mentorship ‘twinning’ schemes.
- Based on the complex factors that contribute to systemic, sustainable change, we suggest that a funding body should commission a full mapping exercise and use this to inform a theory of change. The diversity of influences and complicated ways that systems come together to contribute to the current environment necessitates rigorous consideration. By mapping these factors, it would be possible to generate an evidence-based theory of change.

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Declarations of interest

None.

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